DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 654 CS 506 678

AUTHOR Sneed, Don; And Others
TITLE Media Literacy Ignored: A Qualitative Call for the Introduction of Media Studies Across the High School Social Science Curriculum.
PUB DATE Aug 89
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (72nd, Washington, DC, August 10-13, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Development; *Decision Making; Evaluation Methods; High Schools; *Mass Media Effects; *Mass Media Role; *Mass Media Use; *Social Studies; Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS Media Analysis; *Media Courses; *Media Literacy

ABSTRACT

Noting that America is behind several countries in media studies and that efforts to introduce systematic study and use of media in the curriculum has been sporadic, this paper calls for the introduction of media studies in the social science curriculum of American high schools. Two projects are examined as possible means of helping spread media studies across the social sciences. "Channel One," a controversial new television news program for teenagers which is commercially sponsored and airs daily in six United States high schools, is described as offering an opportunity for students to analyze critically mass-mediated messages. The paper reports that although criticism has come from those who do not like the idea of schools providing "captive audiences" for advertisers, proponents feel the programming provides an excellent opportunity for high school social science teachers to encourage students to become critical consumers of the mass media. Video report cards, produced by journalism instructors and distributed to parents of college students enrolled in their writing classes, are described as they represent an attempt to better utilize media technology in the evaluation process. (NH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED307654

MEDIA LITERACY IGNORED: A QUALITATIVE CALL FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF MEDIA STUDIES ACROSS THE HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM

Don Sneed
Associate Professor
Department of Journalism
San Diego State University

K. Tim Wulfemeyer
Associate Professor
Department of Journalism
San Diego State University

Roger Van Ommeren
Professor
Department of Journalism
Baylor University

Daniel Riffe
Associate Professor
School of Communications
University of Alabama

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Don Sneed

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, Secondary Education Division, August 1989, Washington, D.C.

CS506678

Media Literacy Ignored: Time is Past Due for Introduction of Media Studies Across the High School Social Science Curriculum

Despite the fact that mass media have become virtually ubiquitous in our information society, American high schools generally devote little attention to systematic study of media. This "head-in-the-sand" approach can have far-reaching consequences. Considine (1987) notes that young people are given no guidance as to how to read, interpret, and critically evaluate the images and information they are visually exposed to even though they are exposed to more media messages than ever before, thus leaving students "visually vulnerable and potential victims of a language that can influence and manipulate them."[1]

American high schools, like many of their counterparts around the world, need to ensure that literacy is achieved in three areas: print, computer, and media. Schools no longer can afford to treat the curriculum as if print were the main form of communication; indeed schools must recognize that the advent of new information technologies means that visual, computer, and media literacy are a necessary partner to print mastery.

One way to begin this media literacy effort is through offering media studies in the high school social science curriculum--engaging students in the learning process by taking advantage of their natural interest in the media culture that saturates their very existence: VCRs, cable television, tape recorders, radio, newspapers, video cameras, and movies.

Toward this end, two innovative projects will be examined as possible means of helping to spread media studies across the social sciences. First, "Channel One," a daily news and information program designed for broadcast to teenagers by Whittle Communications of Knoxville, Tenn., will be described and discussed.[2] Beamed by satellite into participating classrooms, the 12-to-15-minute programs are made possible through corporate funding. The programs contain domestic and international news, features, and commercial advertising. Throughout the school day, teachers can elect to elaborate on the programming that is initially presented by news anchors.

In addition, the paper will describe video report cards produced by the authors of this study--videotapes made with a video camera and sent home to parents of students enrolled in college journalism classes.[3] The video report cards represent an attempt to better utilize media technology in the evaluation process. The video report cards also represent "mass-mediated" interpersonal communication involving instructors, students and parents.

The paper will end as it began: with an urgent call for the introduction of media studies in the social science curriculum of American nigh schools. Our plea is to create an awareness of the need for American high schools to begin development of an understanding of mass media--how they work, what role they play in our lives, what they could or should do, their ownership, their content, and their organization. It is especially important that students begin to develop the skills necessary to interpret and analyze a variety of video messages in this highly visual world. The key component in media studies is to teach students critical viewing skills--to cut through the visual undergrowth to help students become critical video consumers who are literate in "reading" visual messages. Suggestions on ways these things can be accomplished will also be a part of this paper.

Background

America is behind several countries in media studies. France has experimented with a form of media studies for 20 years.[4] In a reform of the British school curriculum, media studies are expected to occupy a prominent place on the agenda.[5] In addition, Australia is recognized as a world leader in its media literacy programs; Canada is thought to be close behind.[6]

In the United States, however, the effort to introduce systematic study and use of media in the curriculum has been sporadic, at best. While a Virginia school presents advanced classes in physics and calculus via satellite to students and other schools offer innovative projects involving computer use and closed circuit television broadcasts of news gathered and produced by students, most American high schools simply ignore the study of mass media.[7]

How important is it for American high school students to become confident media consumers and users who perform competently within, and decipher intelligently, the vast media culture that surrounds them? Nineteen years ago, Toffler (1970) asserted that the knowledge we teach should be directly related to the future: "Nothing should be included in the required curriculum unless it can be strongly justified in terms of the future. If this means scrapping a substantial part of the formal curriculum, so be it."[8] Rather than to scrap a part of the curriculum, we advocate inclusion of media studies within the already existing framework of the social sciences.

Time is of the essence, of course. While Ziegler (1981) maintains tnat half of what a graduate engineer studies today will be obsolete in 10 years[9] and Ornstein (1987) believes that half of what we will need to know to function in a scientific or technical job by the year 2000 is not known today by anyone,[10] this incredible explosion of knowledge and information not only

affects the sciences but also impacts heavily upon the social sciences. Just as we teach students who invented the cotton gin, we should also teach something about the invention and development of radio, television, and VCRs.

The key component to media literacy, however, is understanding the symbols, information, ideas, values, and messages that emerge from the mass media. This critical viewing dimension to media studies is as important as critically understanding the printed word. For high school students to critically think about elements of their culture--popular music, soap operas, movies, radio, newspapers, magazines, television news programs--will allow them to know who constructs the images, why they are constructed the way they are, and what effects the images have on them. "Channel One" offers just such an opportunity for students to critically analyze mass-mediated messages. This unique program is addressed below.

"Channel One"

Channel One is a controversial new TV news program for teenagers. The 12-minute, fast-paced, glitzy program was aired daily in six U.S. high schools this spring as part of a test to determine if it might be an effective way to provide teenagers with information about current national and international events and issues. If Channel One's developers have their way, the program will be aired in more than 8,000 high schools by the end of 1990.[11]

Whittle Communications, the company behind Channel One, provides all of the high-tech equipment needed to receive, tape and air the program. Most of the test high schools received about $50,000 worth of TV monitors, videotape recorders and satellite down-linking equipment. The equipment can be used for other purposes besides Channel One programming.

So far, so good. Few would argue with the need to improve the generally poor grasp that students have of current events or with the desirability of obtaining high-tech TV equipment. The problem is, to pay for the cost of the equipment and the development of program content, Whittle Communications sells two minutes of advertising for each Channel One program. The ads are for products that teenagers use and are exactly like ads on other TV stations.

Most criticism of Channel One has come from people and organizations that do not like the idea of schools providing "captive audiences" for advertisers.[12] Most are also concerned about the ethics of "selling out" education for $50,000 worth of high-tech video equipment. Many schools cannot afford to buy such equipment on their own and the lure of such elaborate "free" hardware might be too tempting for educators to turn down, critics fear. In addition, many worry about the continuing "privatization of the public world" and the trivialization of the students' world--just 10 minutes a day of news, weather and sports.[13]

Nationally known newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman summarizes:

> Schools are expected to teach students values rather than deals. How does a principal explain this commercial exchange? That he sold his students, literally? Must the teachers enforce required viewing of messages from Nike or McDonald's? At the very minimum, the schools become the sponsors of commercials. This is a deal they can refuse. The schools are not commercial turf. They are a marketplace for ideas.[14]

Initial interviews with students and teachers taking part in the Channel One test seem to indicate that many of the concerns expressed over beaming a commercially sponsored TV news program into high schools might not be well-founded.[15] Many students were even somewhat offended that critics apparently thought so little of the critical thinking ability of students.[16] They said seeing a couple of commercials for a product would not make them rush out and buy it.

Perhaps the students are right. They might, in fact, have the critical thinking skills, knowledge and experience needed to analyze mass media messages. The danger, of course, is perhaps the students are wrong. They may NOT have the skills, knowledge and experience to evaluate mass media attempts to manipulate attitudes, values and beliefs.

Granted, Channel One is a new idea, but organizations such as the National Parent-Teacher Association, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and Action for Children's Television would be wiser to channel some of their concern over Channel One to the more critical problem facing education:

Students do not know enough about how the mass media work, how messages can be manipulated by the mass media, what effects mass media messages have on people and how to produce/package their own messages for mass media distribution.

Channel One programming provides an excellent opportunity for high school social science teachers to encourage students to become critical consumers of the mass media. At Gahr High School in Cerritos, California, teachers use examples from Channel One news stories, feature stories and commercials as a catalyst for classroom discussions of broader issues and concerns--pollution, political infighting and the conquest of space (Barreto). In addition, Channel One examples are used to stimulate critical thinking about current events and issues, history, political science, sociology and psychology.

Video Report Cards

As a way to utilize media technology more effectively in the social science curriculum in high schools, teachers might consider adapting a project tested in 1988 that involved journalism instructors' production and distribution of video report cards to parents of college students enrolled in

writing classes. The instructors decided to conduct the project after noting that several researchers had found the traditional printed report card that is mailed home is an inadequate method for reporting information about a student's performance.[17]

Each report card was divided into three segments: a short overview of the course along with a rationale for producing the video report cards, excerpts from class activities, and a 15-minute personalized evaluation of each student's performance. The final 15 minutes of each video report card showed the instructor displaying and reading from student assignments, contained a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of a student's writing, offered suggestions for areas that needed improvement, cited areas where improvement had occurred, and identified problems such as writing mechanics and story organization. This portion of the videotape also noted especially creative or effective writing and other contributions the student had made over and above what was necessary. Finally, the instructor addressed late assignments, lack of effort, absenteeism, and underachievement.

Parents responded favorably to the concept of video report cards for college students, with 95 percent of the parents in support of them. Although no video report cards were sent to parents of high school students, more than 80 percent of the parents thought that video report cards would be a good idea for high school students.

The study also found that more than 90 percent of the parents thought that the traditional printed report card provides too little information about how a grade is assigned. More than 95 percent indicated that the video report card helped them better understand the subject area their child was studying. Every parent indicated that the video report card would be kept. One parent wrote: "I sincerely hope you have set a precedent that will become common

practice. It is refreshing to find teachers who are not tradition bound, but who are seeking and willing to be innovative." Another parent wrote that another of her children, a high school student, watched the video report card and "was motivated to do better" in his high school studies after learning what was required in the college writing class.

Despite the endorsement, video report cards are probably not practical for all courses. They are most appropriate for small classes where teachers get to know students personally and make assignments that can be displayed or read from on camera. In addition, video report cards should be done with near studio quality conditions--something that may cause pause among teachers. As Tamashiro and Campoy have noted, "The dominance of new technologies such as computers, interactive video and electronic communications poses a dilemma for schools: On the one hand, educators want to use these technologies in the curriculum. On the other hand, they are obstructed by limited budgets, lack of expertise and even resistance to technology."[18]

Still, what is most important is that video report cards allow teachers to employ some of the latest technological advances in communications in a creative way. As Adler has pointed out, one of the most significant breakthroughs in the past 50 years, in terms of impact on our lives, has been the revolution in communications and the need for educators to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place in the Information Age.[19] Hamm and Adams have gone so far as to suggest that "changing teaching strategies . . . and creating and manipulating video images are part of the future."[20]

Suggestions for Advancing Media Literacy

Individual high school social science teachers are the ones who best know how to integrate the use and study of media into their classrooms. They are

the ones who must move the schools out of a print-only, assembly line mindset. The computer screen has already been accepted in most schools, and this has helped open the door to various levels of interactive video.

Still, to accept video as an integral part of the teaching environment, there is a real need to heighten awareness of how visual images influence us. Unfortunately, broadcast television has a tendency to emphasize the trivial to the relative exclusion of serious subjects. This makes connecting visual information and intellectual depth even more difficult. Of course, some teachers already use television in class. But watching television does not automatically make an intelligent critical viewer. Ultimately, it is the teacher who must assume the responsibility for helping students to go beyond the lowest common denominator programming to deal intelligently with the TV-dominated culture in which we all find ourselves.

Media studies units could consist of the following:

-- Roles and responsibilities of the mass media.

-- Advertising appeals (What audiences are targeted? How ethical are the persuasive messages? What symbols are used to persuade audiences?)

-- Media portrayal of sexes, races, and social groups (Are minorities too often presented as criminals on TV? Why are there so few middle-aged women television news anchors? Who writes newspaper editorials?)

-- Conservative versus liberal bias in commentaries (Who is Ellen Goodman? Who is Pat Buchanan?)

-- Current issues concerning the news media (Are too many newspapers and television stations group-owned? Since the news media often criticize, shouldn't there be some person or organization to criticize the news media's performance?)

-- Emerging technology (What comes after VCRs, after satellite transmission of news and high resolution photographs from space?)

-- Legal issues in the news media (When is a person's privacy invaded by the news media? What right to privacy does a person have with respect to the news media?)

-- Ethical issues in the news media (Should names of rape victims be published?)

-- Effects of mass media messages on people.

What's more, students might also be shown how to script, shoot, edit, and produce simple video productions. They could also be shown how to gather information, tape record speakers, light a scene, and take a still photograph. The goal is to ensure that students can communicate via visual and aural media as well as through the written and spoken word.

Conclusion

While these suggestions are not meant to be exhaustive, they do serve as a preliminary guide, along with a description of "Channel One" programming and video report cards, in advancing media literacy in the high schools.

Media studies can capitalize on the almost natural tendency of students to adapt to technological innovations, and teachers who might be reluctant to get involved with technology they only partially understand or feel is prohibitive in cost can find that such problems can be mitigated in several ways. Campus media center equipment can usually be used for little or no expense. Help and advice from experts is usually available on most campuses for little or no expense. How-to workshops are often offered by the campus media center, local video stores and by extension or adult education programs. Reading owner's manuals and simply practicing with equipment can also help overcome a lack of knowledge and experience with video equipment.

Clearly, there is more to media literacy and the curriculum than meets the eye. More than anything else, though, social science teachers would serve as guides for their students--helping them wade through and understand the labyrinth of information provided by the media and making students more aware of the role and importance of mass media in their lives and in particular subject areas.

Above all, America must move now to introduce media studies into the high school social science curriculum. It is imperative that no more generations of American high school students be denied the opportunity to learn about the media. This is an educational province that demands action immediately--before further exponential increases in the amount of knowledge and information occur and before we awaken to learn that the British, the Australians, the Japanese and even the Soviets have surpassed us in providing media literacy.

Notes

1. Considine, David M. "Visual Literacy and the Curriculum: More to It Than Meets the Eye," Language Arts, Vol. 64, No. 6. October 1987, p. 635.

2. Whittle, Chris. News Release, Whittle Communications, Knoxville, Tenn., Spring 1989.

3. Sneed, Don and Wulfemeyer, K. Tim. "Video Report Cards: A Visual Communication Concept That Works," paper presented at California Journalism Conference, San Luis Obispo, Calif., March 17, 1989.

4. LaBorderie, Rene. "Media Education in France," Prospects, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1984, pp. 285-93.

5. Fuller, Larence B. "The Media Education Movement: News From Great Britain," English Education, February 1987, Vol. 52, p. 51-57.

6. Tyner, Kathleen. "Media Educators Study Media Literacy Down Under," Strategies for Media Literacy, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1988, p. 3.

7. No author, article appeared in Publishers' Auxiliary, "Today's Teachers Use Tomorrow's Technology," prepared by the Education Leaders Consortium, a coalition of major national education leadership organizations in Washington, D.C.

8. Toffler, Alvin. Future Shock (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 132.

9. Ziegler, Warren L. Social and Technological Developments (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981).

10. Ornstein, Allan C. "Planning the Curriculum in a World of Change," Curriculum Review, January/February 1987, p. 22.

11. Hollenbert, Skip. "High schoolers like controversial new TV news program at its debut," The Californian, newspaper in El Cajon, Calif. March 9, 1989, p. A-10.

12. Ordovensky, Pat. "TV in class: Show, with ads, will go on." USA Today, March 3, 1989, p. 1.

13. O'Leary, Noreen. "ACT's Peggy Charen: A Mother's Work is Never Done," AdWeek, Feb. 20, 1989, p. 32, 34.

14. Goodman, Ellen. "Channel One sends wrong signals regarding education," The Californian, Feb. 15, 1989, p. A-8.

15. Barreto, Nadine. Personal communication with author. March 17, 1989. Mrs. Barreto is the principal of Gahr High School in Cerritos, Calif., one of six Channel One test schools in the nation.

16. Ibid.

17. Brodinsky, B. "Policies on the report card: Keep it? Change It?" Updating School Board Policies, November 1972, p. 1-4; Chansky, N. M. "A Critical Examination of School Report Cards from K-12," Reading Improvement, Fall 1975, p. 184-92; DeSpain, B.C. "Telling parents about their children," Catalyst for Change, Spring 1973, p. 20-21; Giannangelo, D. M. "Make report cards meaningful," Educational Forum, May 1975, p. 409-15; Malcolmson, B. "Reporting to parents: An individualized computer-based approach," Canadian Journal of Exceptional Children, Winter 1985, p. 59-62; Patterson, J. L. "Computerized report cards," Educational Technology, August 1976, p. 39-42; Powell, T. H. "Improving home-school communication: Sharing daily reports," Exceptional Parent, October 1980, p. 24-26; Shedlin, A. Jr. "How about a national report card month?" Principal, May 1988, p. 34, Walling, D. R. "Designing a 'report card' that communicates," Educational Leadership, January 1975, p. 258-60.

18. Tamashiro, R. and Campoy, R. "An interdistrict program to expand technology use in schools," Educational Technology, May 1988, p. 35.

19. Adler, R. P. "California's communications revolution," Cry California, Winter 1981, p. 19.

20. Hamm, M. and Adams, D. "Teaching students critical viewing skills," Curriculum Review, January/February 1987, p. 30.